Heritage Art with an Intent

Nina Sabnani and Michael Buser

Abstract

A collaborative research project called JAL explored the role and potential for the arts to support water security activities in Rajasthan. The intent was to learn about some of the challenges facing people in rural Rajasthan and to draw on the region's heritage toward arts-led research, practice and thinking to help address critical water issues. One project that emerged from the fieldwork took its inspiration from the murals of Shekhawati and the ancient *phad* (painted scroll with stories) storytelling tradition of Rajasthan. It involved local artists who painted a wall with water stories in the village Jhakhoda. The artists also painted a scroll that a local storyteller could use to share with other villages. This article offers a report of the mural project, its process and outcome and the insights gained from a close engagement with the community in the village. The experiences signal the rich potential of collaboration with communities and across disciplines, as well as the role of the arts and artists in engaging with and addressing critical global challenges, such as water security.

Keywords

Arts, heritage, rainwater harvesting, collaboration, Shekhawati murals, *phad* tradition, traditional wisdom

Introduction

This article narrates the experiences of an interdisciplinary team of artists, academics, water managers and development experts who worked together on a research project in a rural part of Rajasthan, India. The collaboration, supported by a 12-month grant funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council,[1] explored the role and potential of the arts to support water security activities in Rajasthan. This article is centred on the processes of development and collaboration through which the work took place.

Background

The research was initiated through an informal dialogue between researchers and artists in the UK and India. In particular, team members were interested in exploring the relationships between water security, infrastructure and care practices in Rajasthan, India. Rajasthan is a predominantly rural state (75% rural), with a landscape that is bifurcated and climate that is dictated by the Aravalli range (GoR, 2010a). To the east, there are many rivers and comparatively high levels of rainfall. However, west of the range, water resources are limited and water security is a significant challenge. Many of these areas rely on the monsoon rains (late June to early September) to replenish aquifers and provide irrigation and drinking water for the year. According to the Government of Rajasthan, there are significant water security challenges, including increasing demand, depleting groundwater resources, poor quality of water (e.g., fluoride pollution) and inequality of access, among other issues (GoR, 2010b).

Our team partner, Centre for Environment and Development Studies, Jaipur (CEDSJ), had been working across Rajasthan to support water security, often through the re-introduction of traditional techniques of water conservation. India is well known for its traditional water architecture and water conservation practices. For example, rainwater harvesting (the use of structures to collect run-off) has enjoyed a long history in Rajasthan and across many areas of the country (Glendenning et al., 2012; Machiwal et al., 2004; Radhakrishna, 2003; Sharma Machiwal et al., 2004; Radhakrishna, 2003; Sharma et al., 2018). Following a period of decline, interest in rainwater harvesting has been rejuvenated in recent decades, often based on a desire to counter the modern trend towards large-scale and centralized water management and delivery systems (Mishra, 2001). Examples of rainwater harvesting include small dams, *tankas* (storage tanks), *johads*, *nadis* (ponds constructed to collect run-off) and *talabs*.

Project Activities

The project began with a series of workshops, seminars and field trips led by CEDSJ. The intent was to learn about some of the challenges facing people in rural Rajasthan and to draw on arts-led research, practice and thinking to help address critical water issues. Two distinct projects emerged from these conversations and field trips. One was to involve school children in a puppet workshop and to create a pop-up museum on traditional water bodies. The other took its inspiration from the murals of Shekhawati and the *phad* (painted scroll with stories) storytelling tradition of Rajasthan (Figures 1 and 2).

The Shekhawati region is often referred to as the world's largest open-air art gallery (Cooper, 2009). This region is dotted with painted mansions or havelis owned by rich traders. The havelis are painted on the outside and the inside for public and private consumption. Learning from images is therefore not unusual for people in this region. The *phad* painting, on the other hand, belongs to a folk tradition of storytelling, and this too is a way of learning for people. The *phad* performance involves a storyteller, a Bhopa, who recites the folk epics of their heroes, Pabuji or Devnarayan, in front of a painted scroll, to the accompaniment of music and dance. The project aimed to bring together these two diverse but familiar traditions that would serve the purpose of communication in one village, as well as travel to other places.

The project proposed to involve local artists to paint a wall with water stories in a village known to some of the participants. They would also paint a scroll that a local storyteller could use to share the stories around various other villages, just like the Bhopa bard from the *phad* tradition familiar to people in Rajasthan. This article offers a report of the mural project, its process and outcome and the insights gained from a close engagement with the village in Rajasthan.

Figure 1. Shekhavati Mansions
Source: Nina Sabnini

Figure 2. *Phad* Performance
Source: Courtesy Kalyan Joshi

Exploring Regional Collaborations

The project began as an international collaboration, which led to regional collaborations between participating members. CEDSJ connected the participant designer with the Ramkrishan Jaidayal Dalmia Seva Sansthan (RJDSS), an NGO working in the area of water security in the Shekhawati region. The designer then identified a local artist known to her, and a field trip was organized to identify a village and the location of the site where the mural would be painted. Visits were made to several mansions with murals in the Shekhawati region, and inspirational images from these murals were documented. During this trip, a workshop was organized by RJDSS in Chirawa to familiarize each member with specific issues around water conservation pertaining to each region and the work done by RJDSS in these regions. The design team shared their ideas of the proposed wall mural and the painted scroll. This sharing gave rise to mutual respect for each other's work, and a school wall in the village Jhakhoda was identified as the site for the mural. The school was situated close to the road, so the wall would be visible to passers-by as well (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Jhakhoda and Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan

Source: Nina Sabnani

Storytelling and Visual Narratives

In many of the conversations between the water experts and RJDSS, it was observed by the designer that they usually spoke of how things were before, how they are now and how they might be in the future if no action is taken to conserve water. This gave shape to the visual narrative of the mural. The ubiquitous arches present in the murals of the Shekhawati mansions inspired the structure. The arches offered scope for separation of the past, present and options for the future. The traditional *phad* (painted scroll) has multiple events painted side by side if they happened to occur in the same place. This knowledge inspired the idea of portraying events taking place in the same village over different periods within each arch. The content of each arch was discussed with the team from CEDSJ, and the visual content emerged from the images of the Shekhawati murals and *phad* paintings. The concept was visualized by the designer and shared with the team of artists. To give the feeling of a Shekhawati style, it was suggested that a roof-like extension be constructed on the school wall. It would also protect the painting from getting washed off by rains. RJDSS was familiar with the people in Jhakhoda and facilitated this through negotiations with the school. The school not just generously offered the team the wall but also provided a large classroom where the artists could store their material, paint the scroll and rest.

Staging the Narrative

The wall became the stage for the unfolding of the narrative, and with it the team was also on display for the village residents. At first, the residents observed from a distance and whispered among themselves. As time went by, the residents felt free to walk up to the male artists and ask them questions about the goal of the painting and its purpose. Other times, they suggested additions to the imagery, which were taken on board and added to the painting. Some artists were also invited to people's homes and even participate in a wedding celebration. Attending the wedding of a Dalit[2] household caused a stir in the village, and the artists felt empowered to start conversations around untouchability. A few residents also sat around the artists in the late evenings discussing the local problems over a drink. These forms of interaction point to the ways in which the arts can serve as a space of debate and critical reflection (Stupples, 2014). We found that the permeable space of the school and the school wall allowed the arts team to become part of a wider debate about social and environmental challenges in the village—with learning and dialogue flowing across the artist–community relations.

Negotiating Challenges

Working in rural Rajasthan presents a distinctive set of arts challenges. The team had arrived in Jhakhoda in the month of May, when temperatures can soar up to 45°C. The wall received direct sunlight in the afternoon, which made it impossible for the team to work on it. They used this time to paint the scroll inside the schoolroom given to them (Figure 4). As the heat became unbearable, an air cooler was procured, which was later gifted to the school by the design team. To be able to complete the work on time, the artists decided to paint at night, but to do that they needed some light. To facilitate its light to fall on the wall the bulb had to be hoisted high enough, and this became an adventure (Figure5). There was a wire above on which the bulb could be hung, but there was no ladder, so one of the artists climbed on top of the van to hang the bulb on the wire. This created other problems for the artists. Unfortunately,

Figure 4. Painting of the Scroll

Source: Nina Sabnani

Figure 5. Painting at Night

Source: Nina Sabnani

the bulb was stolen on the first day. Then, once replaced, the bulb attracted a whole swarm of insects and mosquitoes, which also got into the paints and attacked the artists. The idea of painting at night was thus abandoned; instead, the artists chose to arrive at the site very early in the morning to beat the heat, as well as gain more time. There were several other unforeseen situations, like a dust storm followed by a hailstorm, that got the entire team running to safeguard the paint buckets from acquiring dust and worried about whether the painting on the wall would get erased by the rains. This was the acid test, which the mural survived, as did the team.

Impact on the Residents andArtists

Working with the arts has the potential for myriad forms of benefits. These include (among many other benefits) awareness raising, education, personal growth and enrichment (Matarasso, 1997), empowerment and agency (Clammer, 2015; Ware & Dunphy, 2020) and even improvements in health and well-being (Fancourt & Finn, 2019; Perryman et al., 2019). Many of the residents involved were delighted that a painting tradition from the mansions of the Shekhawati region had found its way to a village, elevating the latter's status. They saw the events in the painting as those from their own village and took pride in being seen as a model village concerned with rainwater harvesting. They appreciated the concerns of the 'outsiders' (artists and researchers) and wished that 'insiders' (their neighbours, friends and family) would take as much interest in conserving water. They also saw the painting as a way of making water management more accessible. People could better understand the graphic installation near the recharge well set up by RJDSS (Figure 6). Teachers from the school expressed a need for the painting to be available as posters that could be used in each classroom. School children could easily follow the story

Figure 6. Recharge Well and Installation

Source: Nina Sabnani

Figure 7. Final Presentation to the Residents and School

Source: Nina Sabnani

Figure 8. Kalyan Joshi's work on Pandemic

Source: Courtesy Kalyan Joshi

and would explain it to each other. Suddenly, the painting became theirs, and they were explaining its content to us (Figure 7). We recognized that people feel empowered when they sense they have agency and that their contributions are meaningfully incorporated into development and research activities. The mural attempted to do that. Through the mural and *phad* painting work, we explored ways in which people could feel they were contributing to water security, both as individual citizens and as a community. This process of facilitating individual and community agency is an important role that artists can play in water management and development activities.

There was also a significant impact on the arts team. The artists of Rajasthan on this project had never attempted this kind of work. They were used to painting traditional horses, elephants, camels and people in their style. They also asked the designer a lot of questions about interpreting scientific data as imagery. These experiences went on to influence later arts activities. Two of the artists shared the work they did once they returned home (Figure 8). Inspired by the experience of painting on the wall, they painted a wall in their own town and even trained children from the slums to paint in the *phad* style. The paintings made by children on paper were sold, and the proceeds were divided among the children. Recently, one of the artists made paintings on the pandemic, attributing the idea of doing this to his experience of painting the mural in Jhakhoda. These small shifts represent empowerment of the arts and artists to see their work as 'world-changing' and relevant for critical global challenges.

Conclusion

The mural project can be used to highlight a number of key insights for interdisciplinary research and, more specifically, the potential for artists to be active agents in addressing critical social and environmental challenges (Murthy, Kagal, & Chatterjee, 2000).

First, we note how **collaboration can strengthen research endeavours**, particularly across disciplines and sectors (and *with* people). Much has been made recently of the turn to 'co-construction'. Yet, these forms of working have a long and storied tradition founded in the activism of Freire (1970) and others who argued for the inclusion of 'unheard' voices, recognizing the value of situated knowledges. In Jhakhoda, the mural and *phad* painting are representations of local experiences and culture, whose relevance is magnified by the interactions and involvement of local people. Moreover, as an arts–science collaboration, this project was framed by an interdisciplinary approach to research. Many scholars have noted that this is critical to research involved in addressing seemingly intractable problems, including water security (Bakker, 2012; Walker, 2015). Artists, researchers and NGO contributors on the team have noted how the collaborative arrangements enabled significant personal and professional growth, well beyond the life of the project.

Second, we signal some of the **roles and potentials of the arts and artists to address critical global challenges** through research collaborations. On the one hand, artists and designers can help translate or negotiate 'technical' concepts through the use of cultural forms. This reflects the well-known and acknowledged role of the arts in education and the facilitation of awareness raising. More often, research and development projects are incorporating artists and arts practice into their programming in order to facilitate

communication and widespread engagement. The experiences in Jhakhoda clearly explicate how artists helped draw attention to local water challenges and engaged a large proportion of the community, both during and after the life of the project. On the other hand, we know art and art processes can do more than raise awareness. Indeed, art *makes* meaning (Leeson, 2017). Beyond simply explaining difficult concepts or drawing attention to environmental conditions and responses, the arts can make these experiences personal and emotionally engaging. This meaning-making activity is crucial in

working to shift attitudes and practices. Of course, this must be done in concert with communities and individuals. The sense of investment in the ideas is stronger when the community feels empowered by its contribution towards this meaning making. Empowerment is key, because the moment people feel they can do something about their situation, they do not need an external force to bring about change in their attitudes. Art can gently nudge that confidence. The experiences in Rajasthan signal some ways in which this can be done.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

Arts and Humanities grant (AH/R003947/1) 'Investigating a role for the arts in supporting relations of care in Rajasthan's traditional water infrastructures

Notes

1 AHRC grant reference AH/R003947/1 'Investigating a role for the arts in supporting relations of care in Rajasthan's traditional water infrastructures'. The funding supported 1 year of collaborative activities during 2018 in India and the UK. More details can be found on the project website https://rajasthanwater.weebly.com/

2 In the traditional Indian caste system, Dalits were considered as lower-caste citizens and subjected to untouchability. In the village Jhakhoda, people did not socialize with members of the Dalit community. The artists were invited by the Dalit community to attend a wedding in their family. The village chief was with the artists when this invitation was made. To sound fair and inclusive, the village chief encouraged the artists to attend the wedding. The artists suggested that the chief accompany them to the wedding, since they did not know their way. The chief attended the wedding but did not eat with the community. This observation was made by the artists and later became a point of discussions among themselves.

References

- Art with an Intent. (2018) [online]. Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SFjWdW0pkWA [Accessed 22 November 2020].
- Bakker, K. (2012). Water security: Research challenges and opportunities. *Science, 337*(6097), 914–915.
- Clammer, J. 2015. *Art, Culture and International Development: Humanizing Social Transformation*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Cooper, I. (2009). *The painted towns of Shekhawati*. Prakash Books India.
- Fancourt, D., & Finn, S. (2019). *What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being. A scoping review.* WHO Regional Office for Europe.

- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (translated by M. B. Ramos). Penguin.
- Glendenning, C. J., van Ogtrop, F. F., Mishra, S. K., & Vervoort, R. W. (2012). Balancing watershed and local scale impacts of rain water harvesting in India—A review. *Agricultural Water Management, 107*, 1–13.
- Government of Rajasthan (GoR). (2010a). *Demographics and statistics*. http://rajasthan.gov.in/AboutRajasthan/ DemographicsAndStatistics/Pages/default.aspx
- Government of Rajasthan (GoR). (2010b). *State water policy*. Jaipur: State Water Resources Planning Department.
- Leeson, L. (2017). *Art: Process: Change—Inside a socially situated practice. Routledge advances in art and visual studies*. Routledge.
- Jain, J. (2002). *Picture showmen: Insights into the narrative tradition in art.* The Marg Foundation.
- Machiwal, D., Jha, M. K., Singh, P. K., Mahnot, S. C., & Gupta, A. (2004). Planning and design of cost-effective water harvesting structures for efficient utilization of scarce water resources in semi-arid regions of Rajasthan, India. *Water Resources Management, 18*(3), 219–235.
- Matarasso, F. (1997). *Use or ornament: The social impact of participation in the arts*. Comedia.
- Mishra, A. (2001). *The radiant raindrops of Rajasthan*. Research Foundation for Science, Technology, and Ecology
- Murthy, L., Kagal, A., & Chatterjee, A. (2000). *Learning from the field-experiences in communication*. UNFPA, National Institute of Design.
- Perryman K., Blisard, P., & Moss, R. (2019). Using creative arts in trauma therapy: The neuroscience of healing. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling, 41*(1), 80–94.
- Radhakrishna, B. P. (2003). Rainwater harvesting, a time-honoured practice: Need for revival. *Current Science, 85*(9), 1259–1261.
- Sharma, O. P., Everard, M., & Pandey, D. N. (2018). *Wise water solutions in Rajasthan.* WaterHarvest.
- Stupples, P. (2014). Creative contributions: The role of the arts and the cultural sector in development. *Progress in Development Studies*, *14*(2), 115–130.
- Walker, W. E.; Loucks, D.P. and Carr, G. 2015. Social responses to water management decisions, Environmental Processes, 2(3) 485-509
- Ware, V.-A., & Dunphy, K. (2020). How do arts programmes contribute in international development? A systematic review of outcomes and associated processes. *Progress in Development Studies*, *20*(2), 140–162